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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: BIOS OF SELECTED GOVERNORS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

1. (C) Candidates backed by President Hugo Chavez won 20 of 22 gubernatorial races on October 31, 2004, in addition to the Caracas mayoralty. Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) and allied parties picked up 7 states and lost only one. The new governors' competence varies; some are career politicians, others have managerial experience, and a few have scant qualifications except for a long personal history with Chavez. Nonetheless, all have in common a proven loyalty to the President. Of the 20, nine are former military, at least five played a direct role in Chavez's attempted coup in 1992, and one, Barinas Governor Hugo de los Reyes Chavez, is the President's father. Biographic data on selected governors follows. End summary.

Anzoategui: Tarek William Saab Halabi (MVR)

2. (C) Called the "most fervent militant of the revolution" by the opposition press, Tarek William Saab is a diehard radical. A former human rights lawyer who has professed an admiration for Cuba since age nine, Saab earned the President's admiration when he visited Chavez in prison in 1992. Saab, of Lebanese Druse extraction, was denied a US visa in 1997 because of his links to terrorist activities. After violating the terms of a waiver he received in 2000 for an official visit to Washington, he had the National Assembly issue a decree exhorting the United States to review his visa renewal petition. One of the administration's most vociferous critics of the United States, Saab oversaw debate about US "aggression" and "genocide" as chair of the National Assembly's foreign policy committee and boasted that Venezuela was the first country to overcome a CIA plot. During April 2002, Saab was detained briefly for resisting the Carmona government.

3. (U) Saab, nonetheless, has demonstrated a commitment to improving the standard of living in his oil-rich state. Upon running for governor on a platform of assisting the majority poor and countering the former administration's waste, Saab received 57 percent of the Anzoategui vote. He brought the press into a dilapidated hospital immediately after taking office to show the neglect his administration had inherited from previous governors. Saab has chastised the state's mayors for their poor track records and has singled out two pro-Chavez mayors for trying to undermine his leadership. Opposition members backing the mayor of an upscale Anzoategui suburb told poloff, however, that Saab has signaled his willingness to work with the opposition and has supported local efforts to provide better security and infrastructure repair.

4. (U) Saab was born in El Tigre, Anzoategui, in 1963. Saab told the press he decided to study law because he was unjustly detained as a minor. He entered Santa Maria University (USM) and the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), where he specialized in criminal law and human rights law, respectively. Along with other administration notables such as Caracas mayor Juan Barreto and CNE director Jorge Rodriguez, Saab belonged to "Movimiento 80," a political student movement at UCV that opposed traditional parties. Saab headed the human rights office of the Caracas municipal council's public security committee (1994-98). He served as delegate to the constitutional convention (1999), in which he headed the cultural and human rights committees. In the National Assembly, he was vice president and then president of the foreign policy committee (2000-04). Known as the "poet of the revolution," Saab has published eight books. He and his wife, Francis, have three children.

Bolivar: Francisco Rangel Gomez (MVR)

5. (C) Francisco Rangel Gomez was born on April 4, 1953. A classmate of Chavez's in the Venezuelan Military Academy (AMV), he graduated in 1975 with a degree in military arts

and sciences. In 1986, he received a degree from the Armed Forces University Polytechnic Institute (IUPFAN) in systems engineering. He earned a master's degree in information systems from Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB) in 1988 and a master's in national security studies and defense from the Armed Forces Institute of High Defense Studies (IAEDEN) in 1996. He also studied at the School of the Americas. As an active duty officer, Rangel directed the AMV and served as Chavez's Minister of the Secretariat of the Presidency from 1999-2000. After serving in the cabinet, he became president of the Corporacion Venezolana de Guyana (CVG), a state-owned mining and utilities parastatal until becoming governor in 2004. Both opposition and government contacts of the Embassy have credited Rangel with being a successful manager at CVG. Rangel is married with children.

Carabobo: Luis Felipe Acosta Carles (MVR)

16. (U) According to press reports, Chavez asked former Brigadier General Acosta Carles to run for governor in 2004, but Chavez himself has said Acosta surprised him by seeking permission to hang up his uniform and seek election. Acosta's colorful persona has become evident from his relatively few public appearances to date. He is remembered for burping in a televised confrontation with a Coca-Cola distributor in December 2002 during the general strike. He also received publicity for defending one of his non-commissioned officers who struck a female anti-Chavez protester and having officials detained for blocking workers from their places of business during the strike. In one pre-election interview, he listed unconventional means of increasing employment, including hiring dwarfs to form a "Snow White" theater act. In February 2004, he said on Chavez's weekly "Alo Presidente" television and radio program that he was "already the governor" because of his role in providing new housing for the Carabobo poor. Campaigning with the help of the national guard, Acosta harnessed the support of poor residents to wrest Carabobo from opposition Governor Henrique Salas Feo with 50.4 percent of the vote. In his first months as governor, Acosta has faced media criticism for rampant property invasions in his state, which he has been unable, and unwilling, to control despite having retained national guard officers on his staff.

17. (U) As a child, Acosta wanted to be a priest, but he dropped out of seminary to join the National Guard Academy (EFOFAC). He ascended to become head of the National Guard's second regional command. Acosta's brother, who died in the February 1989 riots over gasoline prices, was a classmate of Chavez and a founding member of Chavez's five-person clandestine military group Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200 (MBR-200). Acosta is married. He speaks broken English.

Lara: Luis Reyes Reyes (MVR)

18. (C) Former Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Luis Reyes Reyes has strong, long-standing personal and political ties to Chavez and his Bolivarian Revolution. He attended the same junior high school as Chavez and was a founding member of the MVR. A US-trained F-16 pilot, Reyes Reyes became famous for breaking the sound barrier over Caracas during Chavez's attempted coup in 1992. He described the mission in a press interview as an attempt "to frighten enemy forces." Some Embassy opposition contacts describe Reyes Reyes as a competent governor despite his promises to "deepen the revolution." Upon his second inauguration, he said he opposed the administration's plan for creating anticorruption police, contending that each public official should have the personal conviction to watch over public resources, according to press.

19. (U) Reyes Reyes was born in Punta de Mata, Monagas on June 11 1952. He joined the Venezuelan Air Force (FAV) in 1970. He received a bachelor's in military arts and sciences from the Military Air Force Academy and a bachelor's in public accounting from the Lisandro Alvarado University. He also earned a bachelor's in aeronautical science and received fighter pilot training in the United States. He served as an assistant air attache to the United States and headed the FAV's air acquisitions office in Dayton, Ohio, from which he returned in late 1991 to begin plotting to overthrow then President Carlos Andres Perez. According to his official resume, Reyes Reyes was a member of the National Constitutional Assembly in 1999. In Chavez's administration, he concurrently headed the Transport and Commerce ministry and the Ministry of Urban Development, which Chavez fused into the Ministry of Infrastructure shortly before Reyes Reyes became governor in 2000. He was elected to a second term in October with 72 percent of the vote. Reyes Reyes speaks fluent English.

Merida: Florencio Antonio Porras Echezuria (MVR)

110. (U) Former Army Major Florencio Porras participated in Chavez's coup attempt in 1992 and was jailed for not accepting the rule of Pedro Carmona during Chavez's 46-hour ouster in April 2002. Porras's public works projects have earned him praise from even some members of the opposition. For example, his government is building a hydroelectric complex, constructing the country's largest artificial lake along with the Tachira government, and has established a trolley bus system with Spanish Government and international financial institution loans. Fancying himself a man of the people, Porras prefers to talk with the peasants and ride horses and burros in the Merida countryside. The Governor, who says he only goes to the office for protocol and administrative duties, spends five days a week talking to the people and supervising public works, according to press.

111. (U) Porras was born in Guarenas, Miranda, in about 1962. He was a member of the National Constitutional Assembly (1999). He has served as President of Corpoandes, a local development parastatal. In 2000, Porras squeaked by former Governor William Davila (AD)--who claimed fraud--to become governor with only a plurality of votes. He won a second term more handily, beating Davila with 59 percent of the vote. Porras enjoys cartooning.

Miranda: Diosdado Cabello Rondon (MVR)

112. (U) Former Army Lieutenant Diosdado Cabello's relationship with the President goes back to his student days in the AMV, when Chavez played on his baseball team, according to press reports. During the 1992 coup, Cabello led four tanks to the Presidential palace. He joined Chavez's presidential campaign early, while Chavez was still low in the polls, press reports note. When Cabello was part of the Chavez administration, the opposition accused him of leading the Bolivarian circles, which he has defended as an unarmed social movement.

113. (U) Named for the head of the Masons and then Philippine President, Diosdado Macapagal, Cabello was born in El Furrial, Monagas on April 15, 1963. He graduated from the AMV in 1987 with honors. He has degrees in engineering project management from UCAB and in systems engineering from IUPFAN. He served as general director of the national telecommunications commission (CONATEL) from 1999-2000. Having held more positions in Chavez's cabinet than any other official, Cabello has been Minister of the Secretariat of the Presidency (2001-02), Vice President (2002), Acting President (a few hours during the 2002 coup), Minister of Interior and Justice (2002-03), and Minister of Infrastructure (2003-04). Upon entering office as governor in 2004, he declared a state of emergency in the Miranda health sector. He and his wife, Marlene, have three children.

Monagas: Jose Gregorio Briceno Torrealba
(MVR/MIGATO/PODEMOS)

114. (U) Jose Gregorio Briceno is the popular governor of the oil and gas-rich rich state of Monagas. Briceno left the National Assembly in 2004 to defeat two-term opposition governor Guillermo Call, whom the National Assembly was investigating for corruption and human rights violations, with 57 percent of the vote. Mauro Marcano, a journalist known for exposing corrupt public officials before his assassination in 2004, had also denounced Briceno for favoring friends and family with PDVSA contracts as a National Assembly deputy.

115. (U) Briceno studied law at USM, as did Tarek William Saab. He became Latin America's youngest mayor at age 26, when he won office in Monagas's Cedenio Municipality, according to his official resume. He was reelected with the third-highest percentage of votes in the country. Briceno joined the Radical Cause (Causa R) party after leaving Accion Democratica (AD) in 1991, accusing AD of impoverishing the state. In 1997, his wing of the party splintered to form the now pro-Chavez "Fatherland for All" (PPT) party. Briceno was elected to the National Assembly in 1999. In 2001, Briceno, nicknamed "El Gato," formed MIGATO, a party whose acronym expands to translate "The Independent 'We All Win' Movement."

Tachira: Ronald Blanco La Cruz (MVR)

116. (C) Former Army Captain Ronald Blanco La Cruz is one of Chavez's closest allies. Blanco was one of the ideologues

behind the 1992 coup attempt. As governor, Blanco ordered the controversial arrest of nine Tachirans--three of whom remain in prison--for their alleged involvement in the events surrounding Chavez's brief ouster in April 2002. Blanco, however, privately disagrees with Chavez on the subject of relations with the United States because he believes US investment in Venezuela is necessary to alleviate poverty, according to DAO. Blanco also told the DAO he fondly remembers his time at the school of the Americas at Fort Benning and thus is a proponent of US training for Venezuelan officers. Blanco has become popular among Tachira residents as a result of the many social projects he has implemented. Blanco was reelected governor in 2004 with 57 percent of the vote.

17. (U) Blanco was born in Caracas on April 12, 1959. He received a master's in military arts and sciences from the AMV in 1981. In addition to his studies at Fort Benning, Blanco received a master's in international relations and business management from Troy State University in Alabama. The University of the Andes has named him a tenured professor. Blanco chaired the border subcommittee of the Constitutional Assembly in 1999. He was elected governor in 2000. He has a weekly television program, but unlike the President, Blanco never talks for more than a few minutes on his show. Blanco and his wife, Guadalupe, have three children. He speaks fluent English.

Vargas: Antonio Rodriguez San Juan (MVR)

18. (U) Former National Guard Major Antonio Rodriguez was born on April 12, 1957 in Zulia State. In 1979, he entered the National Guard Officer Training Academy. He holds bachelor's degrees in military arts and computer science. Rodriguez left the Guard in 1992 and worked in the computer industry until joining Chavez to help found the MBR-200 in 1994. He served as deputy to Congress for the state of Vargas and delegate to the constitutional convention (1999). He was elected governor in 2000 after the MVR decided to withdraw its backing from the former PPT Governor. Rodriguez and his wife, Yolanda Galvan de Rodriguez, have two daughters.

Zulia: Manuel Rosales (UNT/AD)

19. (U) Opposition Governor Manuel Rosales has enjoyed high approval ratings in Zulia state, opinion polls show. Zulia, which has a reputation for having an independent streak among Venezuelan states, elected Rosales for a second term with 55 percent of the vote. Rosales, a longtime AD member and one of two current opposition governors, formed the "New Era" (UNT) party in early 2000 when then-Governor Arias Cardenas left office to run for President. AD and 20 other parties and organizations supported Rosales's candidacy. The radical pro-Chavez press has accused Rosales, the only governor to have signed the "Carmona decree," which endorsed the 2002 coup against Chavez, of having plotted Chavez's overthrow, his assassination, and Zulia's secession from the Republic. 20. (U) Rosales was born on 12 December 1952. According to press, he did not complete a university degree for personal reasons, but has broad educational experience in Venezuela and abroad. He has participated in a number of courses and seminars on administration and public service, including representing Venezuela at a seminar at Kansas University, according to his official resume. Rosales, who helped found the local Universidad Sur del Lago, taught from 1975-79. He served as internal auditor of the council in Colon municipality (1973-74), town councilor (concejel) in Colon (1979-82), principal deputy in the state legislature (1983-94), and mayor of Maracaibo (1996-2000). Rosales is married.

Comment

21. (C) Most governors, who share Chavez's radical ideological streak, will move quickly to try to "deepen the revolution" in their states. None will stray far from Chavez's dictums, given state reliance on funding from the federal government and the President's penchant for marginalizing politicians viewed as disloyal. Even the opposition governors of Zulia and Nueva Esparta have been reluctant to show independence; both Governors have supported the President's land reform initiative this year. Nevertheless, the near sweep of the regional elections is a mixed blessing for Chavez because his administration now lacks the opposition to blame for state and local governments' chronic failure to provide security, services, and economic development.
Brownfield